

Testimony by

**Carlton Dufrechou
Executive Director
The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation**

Submitted to

**WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
SUBCOMMITTEE**

Of the

**COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

For Hearing on

H.R. 4470

Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program

July 8, 2004

**H.R. 4470, Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program
Testimony by The Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation
Water Resources and Environment Hearing
July 8, 2004**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Carlton Dufrechou,

Executive Director of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation. Thanks you for the opportunity to speak about the environmental status of the Pontchartrain Basin.

The Lake Pontchartrain Basin is one of the largest contiguous estuarine systems on American's Gulf Coast. This 10,000 square mile watershed covers all of southeast Louisiana or about 20% of the state's area. Its habitats and topography are diverse. They range from rolling woodlands in the north to freshwater cypress swamps near the Basin's center to saltwater marshes and barrier islands along its Gulf Coast. At the Basin's heart is the 630 square mile Lake Pontchartrain. Although named a lake by the explorer Iberville, technically Lake Pontchartrain is a bay or estuarine area. An area where the fresh waters from rivers meets the salty waters from the sea. Typically, these are the most productive areas on Earth.

The Basin encompasses 16 parishes, including Louisiana's two fastest growing parishes, as well as the New Orleans and Baton Rouge metropolitan areas. It is home to two million people or 40% of the state's population. Over 1.5 million residents live immediately around Lake Pontchartrain making it the most densely populated area of Louisiana.

Historically, Pontchartrain played a significant role in the development and growth of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and the United States. Throughout the 1700's and until the mid 1800's, Pontchartrain and its rivers, bayous, and coastal waters provided the primary means of transportation, communication, and commerce. During the late 1800's and first half of the 1900's, the Basin was an economic engine for the region. Its natural resources – timber, fisheries, and minerals benefited society.

Since the late 1940's, population, urbanization, and land use changes have increased. Adverse impacts to Pontchartrain's ecological resources have been great. Inadequate wastewater treatment, storm water discharges, and agricultural activities have degraded water quality. In July 1962, the first "NO SWIMMING" signs were posted along the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain due to high level of pollution. By the mid 1980's, almost every river and bayou in the Basin was polluted. Poorly planned growth in floodplains has destroyed terrestrial habitats and induced flooding. Dredging of channels and canals like the 70 mile long Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO) has destroyed wetlands, increased saltwater intrusion and expanded dead zones. Even as we speak, an acre of wetlands disappears every 36 hours along the MRGO. Natural occurrences like hurricanes, shoreline erosion, and land subsidence compound these problems.

Because of the watershed's declining environmental health and public concern, the State of Louisiana created the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation (LPBF) in 1989 and tasked it with the mission to restore and preserve the water quality

and habitats of the entire Pontchartrain Basin. With the help of citizens, the business community, local governments, state agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other Federal agencies, the LPBF has acted as a catalyst and coordinator for Pontchartrain restoration. Accomplishments have been many. A Comprehensive Management Plan for the Basin's restoration was completed; detrimental activities such as shell dredging were discontinued; waste retention lagoons were constructed to eliminate pollution from dairies and other agricultural operations; abandoned oil and gas structures were removed; waste water treatment systems were repaired; wildlife refugees were created. Yet much remained to be done.

Recognizing Pontchartrain's significance, very early in his first term, Congressman David Vitter authored and introduced the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Act of 1999. The goal of Congressman Vitter and the Louisiana Congressional delegation was to elevate the importance of Pontchartrain's restoration to the national level; to enhance existing partnerships; to create new alliances; and to provide cost share funding for major restoration projects.

The Pontchartrain Restoration Program is working. Water clarity has improved. Seagrasses and clams have made a dramatic recovery. Pelicans are plentiful again. Manatees have returned. Blue crabs production is enormous. Pontchartrain leads the nation in oyster production. Trophy size fish are abundant. The Lake's water quality has improved quantifiably. "NO SWIMMING" signs are coming down. Beaches are being opened. Lake Pontchartrain is again fishable and swimmable.

We still have a long way to go. While water quality has improved on the lake's south shore, it appears to be getting worse on the north shore and in the upper basin. Sprawl, - explosive, poorly planned urbanization has increased pollution, destroyed habitats, and induced flooding. To the southeast, the MRGO is still the major coastal environmental and storm surge problem.

The Pontchartrain Restoration Program addresses these problems. It strengthens our existing community-based watershed restoration efforts. It provides additional technical support. It augments regional support and consensus. It could provide cost share funds necessary for the major restoration projects. It could help make the Pontchartrain ecosystem sustainable.

The economic benefits of a healthy, sustainable Lake Pontchartrain Basin ecosystem are estimated to have a present value of almost \$1.3 billion. Those are benefits not only for the region and Louisiana but also for America. Please support H.R. 4470, the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Restoration Program.

In closing, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Congressman Vitter for his foresight and leadership creating and championing the Pontchartrain Restoration Program and to the Congressmen Jefferson, Tauzin, and Baker for their support

as well as to Senators Landrieu and Breaux for their strong support for Pontchartrain in the Senate. Mr. Chairman, Subcommittee Members, thank you for the honor of addressing you this afternoon.

Supplemental Sheet

FOLLOW-UP ADDRESS

Carlton F. Dufrechou
Executive Director

Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation
P.O. Box 6965
Metairie, Louisiana 70009
Telephone: (504) 836-2215
FAX: (504) 836-7070
Email: carlton@saveourlake.org